

US-Japan Water Diplomacy in Southeast Asia

By Kei Namba

Southeast Asia is often considered "a global hot spot for water crises", where clean water supplies and sanitation in many cities are fragmented and suffering from weak planning, monitoring, and investment. Southeast Asia is going through rapid urbanization today, and its urban population is set to rise from 280 million today to 373 million by 2030. The structure of water governance in Southeast Asia is multi-level, linking local actors to transnational actors in various structures, making regulatory coordination challenging. Cooperation between the United States and Japan for water supplies in Southeast Asia will not only promote effective water governance and implement sustainable development goals (SDGs) in Southeast Asia, but will also further strengthen stabilization and conflict prevention in the Indo-Pacific region. While the United States and Japan already cooperate on water-related challenges in Southeast Asia, local level cooperation for water governance should be especially highlighted, as subnational governments have become increasingly crucial to achieving more effective water supply governance.

Kei Namba,
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Washington, explains that
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At the global level, the USAID and JICA have executed a cooperative water financing project for the Philippines Water Revolving Fund (PWRF), as a part of the US-Japan Clean Water for People Initiative launched in 2002. Initially, the United States and Japan announced that they would pursue jointly financed water projects in Africa, but none were realized in the end. However, under both governments' current strategies for infrastructure development in Asia, the United States and Japan could consider collaboration in sharing water-financing mechanisms in Southeast Asia. At the regional level, the United States has called for closer cooperation in the US-led Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) with its allies including Japan, which aims to work together with the Mekong region to achieve SDGs.

At the local level, Japanese and American subnational governments, as well as the government of Singapore, are leading the way in water and climate issues. Moreover, both the United States and Japan regard the current global water crisis as opportunities for the domestic private sectors and aim to take advantage of the experience gained from overseas water projects to solve domestic challenges.

Several progressive Japanese cities play pioneering roles in water governance, designing and implementing water policies and development projects, experimenting with providing best practices since the 1990s. Japanese municipal actions for global water partnerships have often been associated with the revitalization of the domestic economy, while addressing the shortage of domestic skilled technicians due to demographic changes. Although Japan has been the largest donor in the water sector, the share of Japanese companies in the water sector accounts for less than 1% of the total market share. Therefore, the Japanese government has recognized the need to promote the export of water technology by using the discourse of SDGs.

Similarly, water experts from American cities and states also provide expert advice through the Water Expert Program (WeP), a cooperative program between US Water Partnerships and the Department of State. At the subnational level, the Milwaukee Water Council connects local government, firms, and research institutions working on global water issues through its Water-Centric City initiative. Milwaukee is exploring ways to strengthen global leadership for water through partnerships and promote the export of private business. US-Japan-Southeast Asia trilateral cooperation for water supply at the subnational level however, requires policy coordination by the central government to fill the gaps at different levels of governance and jurisdictions.

Although water supply is often primarily a local challenge, it should be approached as multi-track diplomacy and include central, subnational governments, private sectors, and civil societies. City officials often face difficulties in figuring out how they can contribute to global water solutions including coordination with other donors and host governments, cross-sectoral engagement and finding financial resources. Singapore, a knowledge hub for water issues, plays a key role in filling the gaps between central government leaders, city officials, and industry experts by providing platform for multi-stakeholder dialogues such as World Cities Summit Mayors Forums. In order to make global water cooperation more effective, both Japanese and American diplomats should try to help shape political thinking over national, regional and local development perspectives and implement policies that enable multilevel coordination at different levels.

Furthermore, some Japanese cities are engaged with municipal cooperation for water supply using sister cities relationships. Shiga, a home to Japan's largest freshwater lake, and Michigan have exchanged knowledge on lake management through sister state relations over half a century. The governor of Shiga has proposed to collaborate with Michigan on lake management and addressing common challenges at the World Water Forum in Senegal in 2021. Furthermore, the Mississippi/Mekong "Sister Rivers" cooperation is currently taking place in the Mekong, where US expertise on transboundary water disputes has been transferred. Such existing initiatives could play a particularly important role in facilitating the transfer of best practices and lessons learned in clean water and lake and river governance from Japan and the United States to the Indo-Pacific on urban water governance.

Strengthening water supply governance is also crucial for agriculture and promotes government readiness for natural disasters. Here, the local governments' knowledge and expertise could be also highly useful. Cross-sectoral US and Japan cooperation could take place in countries like Myanmar, especially those that export agricultural products, where securing ground water and preventing water-related disasters remain top priorities. The World Bank, together with Tokyo, works to gather information and lessons learned from Japanese local governments that were affected by natural disasters. In response to the Cyclone Nargis that hit Myanmar in 2008, Kobe has provided emergency goods, as well as technical cooperation to introduce a small-scale water treatment plant to improve access to safe water. The Japanese government sees that there are potential US-Japan collaboration opportunities in Sri Lanka, where the United States has assisted in water supply systems that are resilient for natural disasters, and Japan has provided technical assistance for landslide disaster prevention. The United States and Japan could also expand the existing US-Japan-China clean water network including sustainable river governance led by the Woodrow Wilson Center and including Southeast Asian countries into their policy networks. The United States and Japan could also closely cooperate with the Center's initiative for US-China cooperation in the sludge/waste treatment to energy and protecting freshwater.

Finally, designing and implementing safeguards for water infrastructure projects would be the most critical and core aspect of US-Japan cooperation for sustainable development in Southeast Asia. However, this poses challenges, especially for Japan, where its Environmental Impact Assessment system is weak and public participation is limited. In order to achieve sustainable development in Southeast Asia, both the United States and Japan should make the process of project designing, implementing, and executing accountable and transparent.

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